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Paul Diego Holzer
Executive Director

Re: Testimony on Senate Bill 942

Dear CT General Assembly Education Committee –

Thankfully, you all are looking at making changes to statute 10-223h(b)(1)(B) that dictates who can and cannot serve on a school turnaround committee within the commissioner's network school turnaround process and also how the voting structure works. I know this statute because a former reporter for the Hartford Courant, who is finishing up a case study on how the CN turnaround process worked at Hartford's Clark School last year, just asked me for it. As a non-lobbyist, I am not asking you to do anything. But as an advocate on the ground working with the Hartford community, I am sharing some information that I think you really need to know to get a window into how unnecessarily complicated the process is currently by law. I promise to send you all a copy of the Clark School CN Turnaround Process case study when it is done in 3-4 weeks for more information so you can better understand how the law influenced the process for better or for worse in Hartford just last year.

Perhaps the best way to summarize my conclusions on the current make-up of the turnaround committee and the voting structure is this paragraph pulled from the draft case study we commissioned:

"In the end, Clark Elementary School parent Mille Soto got what she wanted. The neighborhood school in Hartford's North End where she has sent her six children opened in the fall of 2014 with newly painted, burgundy, blue, yellow and green walls and a new outside partner to oversee its turnaround – the Capitol Region Education Council. The colors are a tangible sign of change and emblematic of CREC's willingness to listen to parents, since Soto told CREC's executive director that she wanted to see Clark Elementary School change, and one of her dreams was to see colorful walls.

[...]But getting to that point meant speaking up and holding her ground – because the process of getting unanimous agreement from representatives of multiple factions – the state Department of Education, Hartford Public Schools, teachers, parents, board of education members and teachers' union leaders – ultimately failed, and ensuring Clark still got something proved complex and challenging."

[...] There were times when the teachers at the school felt ready to accept an external partner and were ready to move in that direction, but the local and national union continued to dig in against it even though the teachers they were representing felt this was a good solution for their school," says a participant in the process who requested anonymity.

Parents persuaded the principal to have a school governance council vote, before the turnaround committee was to vote. The SGC, composed of parents, the school principal and teachers from Clark School, voted 10-0 in favor of the plan. Then, the same day, the turnaround committee voted, and the teachers' union representative cast the single

negative vote. The measure failed because the state Commissioner's Network required a unanimous vote."

That pretty much sums up how I feel about the need to have teachers from the school be on the turnaround committee, not their union representatives, so that this process can be about the school community coming together, not district and union factions going to war with each other. It also sums up how I feel about the need for a unanimous vote. If all it takes is one vote to stop the entire process, that the incentive for state, or union or any other external interest group to get involved is pretty high – even an advocacy group like mine!

The last thing I will share is what had to happen to get change at Clark School, after the failure of the turnaround process to solidify a unanimous vote on the turnaround plan: parents going to the Commissioner's Office / parents providing testimony at the State Board of Ed / parents writing a letter to the HBOE to ask the State to intervene / the HBOE voting to give up control to the State / The State working with CREC to become an external partner / The district working out a contract with CREC / the Hartford Board of Ed voting on it / the parents feeling vindicated.

I'm pretty sure that's not how you all intended the process to work, and now you have the power to change it for the future.

Thanks for listening,

Paul Diego Holzer